DEEP DIVE NATIONAL SECURITY

For far-right extremists, the rise of a new enemy: Women

MAY 27, 2026 · 5:00 AM ET

Odette Yousef

Nicole Witherow prays beside flowers placed outside the Islamic Center of San Diego on May 19.
Jae C. Hong/AP

Evidence tied to last week's deadly attack on a California mosque illustrates a violent ideology and playbook that is all too familiar to counterterrorism and extremism experts. A 75-page typewritten document, attributed to the teenage suspects, and a livestreamed video showing the attack show extensive grounding in far-right, neo-Nazi thinking.

But one facet of the ideology behind this attack has, so far, been left out of much mainstream coverage.

"He just flat out says he hates women and that they're the devil and they're destroying everything. And this is an important thing, because that kind of misogyny did not exist in white supremacist circles, say, 10, 15 years ago," said Heidi Beirich, co-founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism. Beirich was referring to the first part of the written document, authored by one of the two suspects.

NATIONAL
The San Diego mosque shooting victims remembered as heroes for protecting children

For many, the suspects' apparent misogyny may seem irrelevant, given that they targeted a Muslim house of worship. But Alex DiBranco, executive director and co-founder of the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism, says it is comparable to antisemitism, a foundational underpinning of white nationalist thinking that is rooted in conspiracy theories. Antisemitism has been an essential ideological component behind white supremacist attacks at mosques, retail establishments frequented by African Americans and Latinos, gay bars and schools.

"We've seen similar kinds of conspiratorial thinking about women 'pulling the strings behind the scenes' as well," DiBranco said. "And so the targeting of a mosque in San Diego is something that is interrelated not only with Islamophobia, but also with antisemitism and deep misogyny."

"Anti-feminist conspiracies"

DiBranco says that scholarship and news coverage of violence that is partly rooted in anti-women conspiracy theories has failed to keep pace with the spread of those dangerous beliefs. The attack at the Islamic Center of San Diego is the most recent example.

"I was surprised when I opened the manifesto — having looked at the prior media coverage — at how deeply blatant the misogyny was throughout," said DiBranco. "[One of the suspects] starts with talking about Jewish people as the No.1 enemy. And then in his next section says, 'And then right after Jews, women are the No. 1 enemy.' "

Just as writings of neo-Nazis and white nationalist killers often use offensive slurs for Jewish people, the document uses a dehumanizing term meant to shorthand "female humanoid organism."

"That section on women uses dehumanizing language that's really popular in the misogynist incel community," DiBranco said, referring to "involuntary celibate" communities, which have evolved into virulently misogynistic online spaces and have even been linked to femicide. "[It's] a term that is intended to indicate that women are actually not human, that they are 'humanoid,' and this has been popular for a number of years."

DiBranco said that the line of thinking expressed in the suspects' writings follows a tired trope: that women are essentially responsible for everything wrong in the world. She has helped to develop a framework for this category of narrative, which she terms "anti-feminist conspiracies." She said that it is important to broaden public understanding of the ties between these narratives and white nationalist violence.

One of the clearest examples of an anti-feminist conspiracy theory that lay behind a neo-Nazi attack, DiBranco said, took place in Norway in 2011. There, a man killed 77 people, including dozens of teenagers at a summer camp. In that case, the perpetrator also left writings behind that outlined his beliefs.

"That manifesto was very clear as well about the fact that he saw feminism and women ... responsible for the 'feminization' of the West and of Europe. They were responsible for what he views as a 'Muslim invasion,' " DiBranco said. "He adhered to another conspiracy theory called 'cultural Marxism,' he talked about anti-political correctness, and all of those things he actually rooted with the idea of feminism of Western women as the key problem."

NATIONAL

The SPLC survived firebombs and death threats. Will it survive Trump 2.0?

Beirich said there were also other signs that far-right extremist movements were trending toward full-throated endorsement of misogynistic conspiracism. She points to the 2014 "Gamergate" controversy, which blew the lid off a culture of sexualized trolling and harassment in the video gaming space; and the culture of violent, anti-woman rhetoric nurtured on *The Daily Stormer*, once the main online messaging board for neo-Nazis. Still, Beirich, whose career tracking far-right extremism spans decades, said the degree to which this misogyny has spread is notable.

"It has completely infected the white supremacist realm," Beirich said. "Misogyny is as important, I would argue, as racism or neo-Nazi-ism now to people that traffic in these kinds of ideas and live in these cultures."

"It is an ideology that is heavily invested in the idea of 'cultural degeneracy' and what are the sources of it," said Elliot Chandler, CFO and researcher at Revontulet, a Norway-based company that does online threat monitoring. "And historically, femininity and the excessive expression of femininity is a core aspect of degeneracy. That is the classic 'This is what the Nazis think' way of approaching it."

This panic over the "feminization" of society also plays a role in the extreme hostility toward LGBTQ+ people, and to inclusive agendas, said DiBranco.

"What's basically at stake at the core is they feel like they had a system in which cisgender white men were supreme and had unshaken dominance. And now these other forces, what they call 'cultural degeneracy,' are undermining that control that they felt ... they had and that they felt ... they had a right to," she said.

Following a "cultural script"

While the primacy of anti-women, or anti-feminist, conspiracism stands out to extremism experts, the attack at the mosque in San Diego has otherwise followed a predictable pattern. In fact, even as some conservative voices on social media falsely claimed that it was "staged," evidence so far suggests that the attack is one of the most ideologically clear-cut to have taken place in recent years.

"It's been a while since we've had ... a true white nationalist attack in the vein of Brenton Tarrant," said Chandler. Tarrant is a terrorist whose deadly attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019 has inspired numerous similar acts of white supremacist violence.

WORLD

New Zealand Finds Intelligence Lapses Leading To Last Year's Mosque Attacks

The video and document attributed to the San Diego suspects were uploaded to an online forum where users share graphic media of murders, suicide, rape and torture. Both are filled with markers that call back to the Christchurch massacre. Matthew Kriner, executive director of the Institute for Countering Digital Extremism, said that the very creation of the video and document for public consumption strongly situates this attack within a specific subculture of far-right extremism.

"The perpetrators filmed their activities in the same script that we've seen previous accelerationist attackers do," Kriner said. "I think what we're seeing right off the bat is a recreation of the Tarrant model of the 'Saints attacker,' wherein Tarrant provided himself as a cultural script."

Accelerationism is a tactic embraced by a subset of far-right white supremacists and neo-Nazis. Its adherents promote terrorism and sabotage to incite a race war and to bring about social collapse. Their ultimate goal is to then rebuild society into a patriarchal, white ethnostate. "Saints culture" is a practice within accelerationist and white nationalist spaces, of glorifying and venerating people who have committed violence in pursuit of their ideological goal.

Kriner noted that in addition to referring to themselves as "Sons of Tarrant" in their presumed writings, their manner of dress for the attack, the white scrawlings on their weapons and their display of the "Sonnenrad" symbol on their clothing were all hallmarks of the Christchurch attack. He and other experts say the suspects likely created the document and video to shape their own legacy within that subculture and to guide and inspire others to copy them.

"That is the goal, is to [say], 'Look at what I am doing ... remember me for it. ... and venerate it. ... And in that veneration, copy it. Do it yourself. Create more of it,'" explained Chandler. "That is one of the goals of accelerationism is that by engaging in accelerationism, more people will do it. ... and then it will become this tidal wave of violence that will wash away society."

This model of movement violence has been disturbingly successful, Chandler said. The Christchurch attack provided inspiration for numerous attacks on U.S. soil. Those include a deadly 2019 massacre at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas; a white supremacist's 2022 shooting spree at a Tops grocery store in a predominantly African American neighborhood of Buffalo, N.Y.; a 2022 mass shooting at a gay bar in Colorado Springs, Colo.; a 2023 attack on African Americans at a Dollar General store in Jacksonville, Fla. Outside of the U.S., it has similarly been tied to numerous instances of hate-driven violence.

"These movements, they're not confined by borders. They are truly transnational," said Beirich. "There have been killings in multiple countries motivated by the same idea: in Germany, in Norway, in the United States, in New Zealand, in Serbia not that long ago, in Bratislava, in Slovakia."

Turning a blind eye to far-right violence

Beirich and other extremism experts say the attack at the Islamic Center of San Diego is a clear warning signal that the longstanding problem of white supremacist terrorism has not gone away. And so it has rekindled concern over the Trump administration's pivot away from countering violent, far-right extremism domestically and abroad.

This month, the White House released the 2025 United States Counterterrorism Strategy document, outlining its priorities and approach to protecting the homeland. It highlights three major terrorist threats to the U.S.: narcoterrorists, Islamist terrorists and violent left-wing extremists. Nowhere does the document mention far-right, neo-Nazi or white supremacist threats.

NATIONAL SECURITY

With no radical footprint, what drove suspect to try and assassinate Trump?

"Far-right terrorism is alive and well, but you wouldn't know it from reading this document," said Colin Clarke, executive director of the Soufan Center, a nonprofit that focuses on global security. "This is an unserious document written by unserious people about a deadly serious subject."

In addition to the omission of far-right terrorism, the document's mention of "violent secular political groups" that are "radically pro-transgender" and of political movements like the Muslim Brotherhood have raised eyebrows.

"I'm not sure ... why gender should factor into a counterterrorism strategy, but there it is," Clarke said.

Although the strategy document opens with a rejection of partisanship in the work of assessing and countering security threats to the U.S., Clarke and others say the strategy reeks of partisanship. Clarke pointed out that former President Joe Biden's name is mentioned seven times throughout the document. Lebanese Hezbollah, a proxy of the Iranian government, with which the U.S. is currently at war, is mentioned twice.

In a statement about the counterterrorism strategy, the White House's principal deputy press secretary, Anna Kelly, wrote, in part, "When President Trump returned to the White House, four years of weakness, failure, surrender, and humiliation under the failed Biden administration came to an end. Today, our nation is strong, our borders are secure, and the United States is respected all over the world."

"I'd like to think about what threats myself and my family will face if we're going to a concert, a parade to the mall, and who is going to harm us," said Michael Duffin, a candidate for Virginia's 8th Congressional District and a former counterterrorism official at the State Department. "And it's not members of the Muslim Brotherhood. It's not members of the far left. It's white supremacists. It's people inspired by ISIS. And those are the actors that this national security strategy should be focused on."

"It's quite dangerous," said Clarke. "It makes the country less safe because it shows you what this administration is focused on and what it's not focused on, where we're going to dedicate resources, and where we're not going to dedicate resources."

domestic terrorism

Together, we chart the course.

You count on public media for stories that help you understand your world — voices that bring us closer together.

People like you power public media. You make it possible for the NPR Network to share our journalism with you and millions of other people, regardless of their ability to pay.

You are the "public" in public media. Can we count on you to support this essential public resource today?

DONATE →

More Stories From NPR

POLITICS
Trump gathers Cabinet as he looks to seal deal to end war

POLITICS
What will Trump do next with Iran?

NATIONAL SECURITY
Gabbard resigns as national intelligence director citing husband's cancer diagnosis

SOURCES & METHODS
Trump counterterror plan: cartels, left-wing violence / San Diego and the far right

LAW
U.S. grand jury indicts Raúl Castro, former Cuban president

WORLD, REORDERING
The townspeople of Vilseck, Germany, worry that Trump may pull out 5,000 U.S. troops

Popular on NPR.org

CHURCH & STATE
Conservative Christians love this painting of George Washington. The event it depicts may not have happened

NATIONAL
Biden sues DOJ to stop release of audio and transcripts tied to special counsel probe

ELECTIONS
Texas general election matchups are finally set. Here's what you need to know

LEARNING IN THE AGE OF AI
This big university system is embracing AI. Students and faculty aren't all on board

2026 WORLD CUP: NORTH AMERICA
39 World Cup teams will be based in the U.S. Here's which squad will be closest to you

INVESTIGATIONS
Trump DOJ mass-deletes info on Jan. 6 riot cases, including violent assaults on cops

NPR Editors' Picks

FAR-FLUNG POSTCARDS
Greetings from Cape Verde, where the sounds of samba, jazz and morna fill the air

MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT
Palestinians use recycling as Israel's restrictions trigger a trash crisis

PLAYING GOD: THE RACE TO SAVE THE WORLD'S BIODIVERSITY
Inside the effort to save one of America's most imperiled salamanders

MOVIES

The movie 'Pressure' leans into the drama of high-stakes weather forecasts

POLITICS

Clyburn's district stays intact as South Carolina Republicans scrap redistricting

IMMIGRATION

ICE is spending millions of dollars on iris scanners, expanding its arsenal of tech tools

terms of use privacy your privacy choices text only © 2026 npr